

MULTICULTURAL

# VOICES

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# ABOUT

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Multicultural Voices is a quarterly magazine produced by the Utah Office of Multicultural Affairs. Its two main goals are to share the programs and projects of the MCA team and highlight the many amazing accomplishments of our diverse communities.

We hope you enjoy this publication. If you have feedback, suggestions, or would like to subscribe, please get in touch.

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# ASIAN & PACIFIC AMERICAN HERITAGE MONTH



*Nisei Veterans attend a ceremony hosted by Governor Gary Hebert in 2011 honoring their service during World War II.*

Because May was Asian and Pacific American Heritage Month, this edition of Multicultural Voices honors the contributions of Asians and Pacific Islanders (API) living in Utah. The featured communities and community leaders highlight the ethnic diversity among APIs and emphasize the power of identifying with our cultural heritage.

From arriving as immigrants and refugees and living in the U.S. as multi-generational residents, APIs are now the fastest growing racial group in the U.S. APIs have been part of Utah's history since Chinese railroad workers arrived in the 1860s. The arrival of Polynesians, mainly Native Hawaiians, in 1889 marked the first Pacific Islanders to settle in the state. Over the course of the next 150 years, other API communities came to Utah for education and employment opportunities and as a result of religious and wartime resettlement. Approximately 90,000 APIs now call Utah home.

We are proud to have a vibrant and resilient API population. We thank them for their efforts in establishing prominent communities that remind them of home — both in Utah and abroad.

With appreciation,  
**Multicultural Affairs Team**

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# EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT



*L to R: Rozanna Benally-Sagg, Jenny Hor, Yajanetsy Ruano*

## Rozanna Benally-Sagg

Ya'at'eeh. I am originally from southeastern Utah in the rural community of Montezuma Creek, located on the Navajo Nation. Currently, I reside in West Valley City with my husband. In July 2015 I began my MCA journey as the Program Specialist for the Office of Multicultural Affairs and enjoy supporting multicultural communities of Utah. I graduated from the University of New Mexico with a Bachelor of Arts in Speech and Hearing Sciences. After receiving my degree, I worked the next 10 years in the speech-language therapy field in public schools and private speech therapy companies. I took a leap of faith and changed careers to support multicultural communities.

## Jenny Hor

I am a first-generation Khmer (Cambodian) American whose commitments to underrepresented communities stem from my family's harrowing journey to the U.S. As a senior member of the Khemera Dance Troupe, I perform classical and folk pieces from the Khmer dance repertoire. In 2014 I received my undergraduate degree in Human Development and Family Studies and Consumer and Community Studies from the University of Utah. I hope to continue the work of those before me in creating meaningful opportunities for communities of color.

## Yajanetsy Ruano

I am a sociology major who enjoys doing community work and strives to be a voice for my community. I attend the University of Utah and hope to get my master's soon after in a community-based field. I also currently work with Gear Up at East High School as a tutor and Comunidades Unidas (Communities United). My ultimate goal is to work with a community organization or as an administrator in higher education helping students attain resources, becoming a voice for underrepresented communities, and being an example for our future generations.





*L to R: Rozanna is wearing traditional Diné (Navajo) clothing. Yajanetsy is wearing traditional Mexican clothing. Jenny is wearing traditional Khmer (Cambodian) clothing.*

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## COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT:

# Jake Fitisemanu Jr. BY JENNY HOR

**T**he work of Jake Fitisemanu goes beyond the usual eight-hour workday. From organizing civic engagements to providing keynote addresses, he does it all. And humility seems to encompass all that he offers.

His commitment towards community advocacy seamlessly intersects with his status as a self-described “regular person.” He once shared the stage with local elected officials addressing a room of Asian American and Pacific Islander students and young professionals. He was one of two individuals not in the political realm but his message was clear: Everyday people are capable of reaching their upper limits to better their community.

Identity is important to Fitisemanu, whose community work is rooted in his Samoan, Chinese, and Korean ancestry. Prior to calling Utah home, Fitisemanu lived in New Zealand and Hawaii.

“I can’t pull myself apart from my culture,” he says. “I love that I can rely and draw on centuries of indigenous wisdom. I reflect back with a lot of happiness. We were an immigrant family.”

His advocacy work also stems from his family. His grandparents passed away from preventable chronic diseases and his work revolves around helping others live long, meaningful lives. He is engaged with the idea of community members working together to empower each other and to “do it for ourselves.”

He enjoys Utah’s “growing diversity” but understands the frequently-cited phrase is a bit of a misnomer.

“We talk about diversity as a theme that’s emerging or a new trend, but if we actually look at the history of Utah, white folks have only been the majority for a very, very short time. It’s important to recognize this growing diversity is not a new idea. However, the immigrant groups coming in are very new.”

Last year, he was appointed to President Barack Obama’s Advisory Commission on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. The commission works to establish ties among local Asian American and Pacific Islander communities and federal agencies by focusing on a broad range of issues such as education, economic development, and health.

“I was actually pretty shocked,” Fitisemanu says when he learned of his nomination. He expressed initial hesitation in serving on the commission because his work doesn’t put politics first. It’s the grassroots and community organizing that keeps him grounded.

He dwelled on his decision for a day before agreeing to the nomination. “The work that we do here affects my own kids and me, as well, so it was an opportunity I couldn’t say no to.”

As the clinic manager for the Health Clinics of Utah, Fitisemanu is tasked with overseeing the state-owned clinics

that serve the general public and underserved communities along the Wasatch Front. His expertise in community health issues is what he intends to bring when meeting with the commission.

Another point of emphasis for Fitisemanu is the creation of youth initiatives. He sees the impact young individuals have when they are given opportunities to collectively organize.

“If there is something I personally would like to do to provide sustainability it would be to increase youth engagement and to really provide empowerment for youth,” he says.

“While I still respect and highly value the elders, I do think there is still a lot more room for the young folks to participate and for closer mentorship to take place.”

Fitisemanu understands his commitment to working with his community isn’t a one-day project but rather a continuous effort. His advocacy work is an extension of himself.

“If there is a legacy that I leave behind, I hope there will be some kind of initiative or program that’s still running, still successful, and still growing and expanding. I hope I can tell my kids or my grandkids that it was just an idea in my young mind years ago and I was able to work with other people, collaborate, and have a positive outcome for the community. If that’s something twenty years from now that I can say for myself, then I think I’ll be pretty proud of that.” ♦



*Jake Fitisemanu wears his formal Samoan lavalava.*

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## UNIFYING THE COMMUNITY:

# Matapuna Levenson

BY YAJANETSY  
RUANO



*Matapuna Levenson at her YWCA Utah office in Salt Lake City.*

**W**hen Matapuna “Puna” Levenson’s older brother had a spinal cord injury that left him paralyzed from the chest down, her family’s lives changed. Although only 15 years old, she and her mother became his main caretakers.

Those responsibilities helped Puna mature and become very aware of her situation as a Pacific Islander in her home state of Hawaii. Since then, advocating for people with

disabilities has always been a need she’s been drawn to because of her upbringing. The impact of a woman of color in her community and family is one that is earned. Puna has worked hard and represented her own culture in the best light.

Her journey led her to become more and more involved with initiatives that catered to helping others, especially



those who are underrepresented in their community. Matapuna's world views continued to develop when she served a church mission on the Navajo Reservation. She saw a population that struggled with many issues, admired the resilience in them, and recognized the system fighting against them. As a social worker these two main events in her life is what kept her grounded and rooted to the cause.

Puna studied at BYU-Hawaii, where she earned a bachelor's degree in Social Work with a minor in Sociology. Afterward, Puna moved to Utah with her husband, leaving behind her immediate family and friends.

In Salt Lake City she interned at the International Rescue Committee, a refugee resettlement agency, and was a case worker and mental health intern. These were enriching experiences that helped Puna apply new skills to her commitment to care for the community.

Now in her role as Salt Lake Area Family Justice Center Guide & Case Manager at the YWCA, she works out her belief that everyone's life is unique and that everyone deserves compassion. She is particularly aware of the needs of Asians and Pacific Islanders in Utah. She sits on the Utah Independent Living Center Board of Directors and the YWCA's Young Women's Council. She is the Veteran Chair for the Utah Pacific Islander Health Coalition and the Utah Pacific Civic Engagement Coalition. She leads with a warm-spirited heart to better her community and family. All of these positions have taught Puna that

everything is relative and she learns all she can to help her community and meet their needs.

Puna works deliberately to be a voice for her community, which doesn't often get its voice heard. The Pacific Islander community has a sizable population in parts of Utah, but their needs are rarely met by the larger systems in place. To attempt to remedy this, Puna utilizes her nonprofit background to educate Utah's Pacific Islander community about the resources available to them.

Puna loves Salt Lake City and the diversity that she sees and interacts with on a daily basis. An important topic that arose was that communities of color need to collaborate and unite to empower the ethnic community as a whole.

As a grassroots organizer, she sees importance in the support that is needed from everyone. She is hoping to hold a huge event for the community with speakers who will rally the community to vote and become aware of social and health resources and services.

As an advocate for women and women of color in particular, she hopes to create her own nonprofit that intersects social justice, direct services, and advocacy work. She wants to host conversations that question beliefs and push people to critically think about their world.

To inspire is to create new paths, and Puna does that for women and her community everywhere. ♦

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# A PASSION TO TEACH: Luseane Tafisi

BY ROZANNA R. BENALLY-SAGG

**T**hrough the wisdom and teachings of her mother and father, Luseane “Luse” Tafisi aspired to become an elementary school teacher because of her passion to help children and serve others. She was taught sacrifice, resiliency, cultural identity, hard work, passion, service, and strength to move forward in her education and career.

In high school she participated in sports, and the inspiration of her coaches reinforced her desire to become an educator. Her confidence also grew through giving drug-free awareness presentations to elementary students.

Luse’s cultural identity and family support were an integral foundation in shaping who she is today. Luse is Tongan, born and raised in Salt Lake City with a close-knit family. Her grandfather taught her to remember her roots and where she came from.

After receiving her college degree and completing her student teaching, she jumped into her first job as a kindergarten teacher after Thanksgiving break. Her first day of teaching would leave a lasting impression — primarily because it ended with a kid nearly losing his tooth — a memory she still recalls vividly.

Excited for that first day, she spent the holiday weekend preparing lessons and decorating the bare walls left over from the substitute teacher. After a successful morning class, she welcomed the afternoon session — including an eager boy that she encouraged to sit down and write his name on a nametag. When she turned away for a brief moment, the little boy fell off his chair and nearly bit through his tongue. Luse ended up having to call his dad to pick him up.

While that was not the type of first day of teaching she anticipated, the incident did not discourage her from being a teacher.

Currently, she teaches first grade at Pacific Heritage Academy (PHA) in Salt Lake City. She begins each day with a technique used by PHA teachers, where she calls out to her students using the Swahili word, “Ago (AH-goh)!” The students answer back with “Ame (AH-may)!” An observer can see the passion she has for helping her students succeed through differentiated and specialized instruction.

She balances family time and work, and Luse and her husband are involved parents to their five children. As passed on from her parents, she teaches her children the importance

of education, cultural identity, and perseverance. Her two sons were recently awarded scholarships to travel with an elite lacrosse team. Her two daughters dance with Tehamata, a Tahitian dance group which also teaches Samoan and Hawaiian dances. Luse spends every evening reading to her youngest son to develop his early literacy skills.

Luse draws her motivation from her continuous desire to learn and strong family support. Because of her dedication to teaching, she was named a Fund for Teachers Fellow and will travel to New Zealand with a colleague to research sources of support for Pacific Islander students and their families.

Scratching only the surface of her profession, she looks forward to a future full of opportunities. Her next goal in furthering her education is to obtain graduate degrees in Special Education and Educational Leadership. For now, she enjoys inspiring her first grade class to become strong readers and excel academically. ♦



*Luseane Tafisi stands with her first-grade class outside of Pacific Heritage Academy.*



*Luseane Tafisi teaches a lesson about cardinal locations to her students.*

# WAT BUDDHIKARAM

BY JENNY HOR



*The entranceway of Wat Buddhikaram features traditional Cambodian architecture.*



*A five-headed naga lines the rails of Wat Buddhikaram.*

**T**he past 41 years for the Cambodian community have been a story of struggle and survival.

The communist takeover of Cambodia marked nearly four years of intense labor and a longing for refuge. In 1975, the first wave of Cambodian refugees settled in Utah and they would become part of the largest refugee resettlement in the U.S.

In 1991, community leaders purchased a home in West Valley City and transformed it into Wat Buddhikaram. For the last 25 years, the unassuming neighborhood has come alive during New Year celebrations and other Cambodian holidays with the sounds of beating drums and chanting congregants.

“The temple is very important,” Thea Yan says. “It’s a place for new generations to understand the Buddhist religion and for our Cambodian community to get closer in building relationships.”

Wat Buddhikaram is the result of the efforts put forth by a community wanting to hold onto a culture they never let go — even as they left Cambodia. They converted the once-standing garage into a sala chan, a multipurpose room used for religious and cultural activities, which the few hundred members eventually outgrew.

When the time came to build a new facility, they worked tirelessly to cook and sell traditional food at large festivals and asked members for their support through financial contributions. They raised \$700,000 to fund the construction of the temple.

“We built a new temple because of the growing needs of the community,” Ray Hour says, who serves on the board of directors. “It was the right time for our generation because we have more time now to volunteer.”

For Hour, religion and culture are inseparable and the temple serves as a unifying front. “If you have religion,

you have culture. They go together side-by-side,” he says.

The temple is also a practice space for the Khemera Dance Troupe. Young Cambodian Americans attend Sunday classes to learn the intricacies of Cambodian classical and folk dances.

“I joined the dance troupe to learn more about my culture and to be around people who are dedicated to preserving a beautiful art form,” Emily Seang says.

Within a community that knows the struggles of displacement, Wat Buddhikaram is home to those who are allowed to practice their cultural and religious beliefs without systemic resistance. It’s a place that celebrates being Cambodian in Utah.

“I love that the temple is expanding to the community,” Seang says. “It really displays our culture and beliefs to people in Utah and others that visit from elsewhere.” ♦



## PRIMED FOR SUCCESS:

# Guadalupe School

BY JENNY HOR

**F**ifty years after opening its doors, Guadalupe School continues to fulfill its commitment to transforming lives through education and ensuring school readiness for parents and their children.

Nestled in the heart of Rose Park, the school incorporates a family learning model with five programs that span from infancy to adulthood. These distinct resources got the attention of the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics, which recognized the school as a Bright Spot in Hispanic Education.

Counselors make in-home visits to expectant mothers and help parents recognize that they are their child's first teachers. Children then enter Toddler Beginnings, preschool, or the K-6 charter school. Adults can enroll in English language or citizenship classes.

"When you look at the demographic we're talking about in this area, in the past, there have been issues with access because of language or economics," Executive Director Richard Pater says. "I think one of the things we've been able to do is to provide an environment in which our students and families feel like they belong."

Data from the Utah State Office of Education shows that 87 percent of the charter school's students are Latino/Hispanic.

Students reciprocate the feelings of Pater as they speak affectionately about their school. Sixth-grade student Jazmine Montoya enjoys class because she can interact with students from similar cultural backgrounds.

Montoya's classmate Diego Perez adds, "I love this school because it has great teachers and great times."

On the other end of the learning spectrum are the adults who attend classes to further their English language skills. For many of the adult learners, the complexity of learning English produces moments of frustration but the end goal of communicating with others makes the process meaningful. English is what allows them to help their children with their schoolwork and to speak with family doctors.

"When you walk down the halls and see our students, what you recognize is tremendous potential," Pater says. "We get to see this potential unlocked everyday by the way we get to interact with our students."

By recognizing the importance of the community surrounding them, Guadalupe School is working to continue the relationships they've built and to create many more. ♦



*Adult learners listen to their instructor during English class.*



*Executive Director Richard Pater.*



*A student participates in an art activity at Guadalupe School.*

# MULTICULTURAL AFFAIRS RECAP

## Multicultural Youth Leadership Summit 2015

The Office of Multicultural Affairs hosted the annual Multicultural Youth Leadership Summit (MYLS) on October 13, 2015 at South Towne Exposition Center. Two thousand students, educators, and civic/community leaders attended. Speakers included Governor Gary R. Herbert, Lt. Governor Spencer J. Cox, Ernesto Mejia and Porter Ellett of CoolSpeak, State Senator Luz Escamilla, and State Reps. Rebecca Chavez-Houck and Sophia DiCaro.

**Save the Date for the 2016 Multicultural Youth Leadership Summit! October 3, 2016 at The Calvin L. Rampton Salt Palace Convention Center. Visit [mca.utah.gov/myls](http://mca.utah.gov/myls) for more information.**



*Students pose for a photo at the 2015 Multicultural Youth Leadership Summit.*



*Nolan Bullethead of Union High School addresses his fellow students.*



*Students attend a breakout session.*



*Lieutenant Governor Spencer J. Cox speaks during the general session.*



*Students take a selfie at the 2015 MYLS.*

## Martin Luther King Jr. Human Rights Commission 25th Anniversary Celebration

The Office of Multicultural Affairs assisted and supported the Martin Luther King Jr. Human Rights Commission in planning their 25th anniversary celebration on December 10, 2015 — Human Rights Day — at the Capitol Rotunda. Three hundred attendees were invited to share how they planned to be “drum majors for justice.” The celebration included remarks by Governor Gary R. Herbert, State Rep. Sandra Hollins, and Reverend Brandee Jasmine Mimitzraiem.



*Dr. Forrest Crawford and Governor Herbert address the crowd at the Martin Luther King Jr. Human Rights Commission's 25th Anniversary celebration.*



*Students stand during the national anthem at the 2016 Multicultural Youth Leadership Day.*

## Multicultural Youth Leadership Day at the Capitol 2016

Multicultural Affairs hosted the annual Multicultural Youth Leadership Day at the Capitol on February 16, 2016. Approximately 550 educators and students were in attendance from various Utah schools.

**Save the Date for the 2017  
Multicultural Youth Leadership Day!  
March 1, 2017 at the State Capitol.  
Visit [mca.utah.gov/myld](http://mca.utah.gov/myld) for more  
information.**

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